Flannery O'Connor

All beak and claws

Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor. By Brad Gooch. *Little, Brown; 448 pages; $30. To be published in Britain by Little, Brown in April*

"THIS is one of the greatest stories ever written in the United States," suggested Robert Giroux, a distinguished American publisher, after reading the manuscript of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor. "That's good stuff," echoed her fellow-southerner, William Faulkner, about O'Connor's first novel, "Wise Blood". Others found her acidly comic tales strong meat. Asked to provide a puff for "Wise Blood", Evelyn Waugh, a British novelist, was moved to ponder: "Why are so many characters in recent American fiction sub-human?" *Time* magazine, in summarising her cast of drowning boys, garrulous southern grandmothers and man-killer prophets, called them "God-intoxicated Hillbillies".

O'Connor is an intriguing writer; each year her status as "minor" is adjusted upward. When she died in 1964, aged 39, of lupus, she had written 31 stories, two novels and, aside from a three-week trip to Europe to visit Lourdes, had spent her entire life in the United States, the bulk of it on her mother's dairy farm in central Georgia. "There won't be any biographies of me", she maintained, "because, for only one reason, lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy." In 1955 she submitted to a rare television interview with NBC and proved a publicist's nightmare, refusing to answer personal questions.

Until now her life has remained hidden behind the hard surface of her fiction. One of the strengths of Brad Gooch's biography is its elegant pooh-poohing of her claim that "experience is the greatest deterrent to fiction" and that "any story in which I reveal myself in completely will be a bad story." In fact, her constricted view of the world was integral to her artistic vision.

Like Waugh, O'Connor was an accomplished cartoonist at college, signing her drawings with a chicken logo. Birds were her chief delight: the peacocks and bantams that she walked around her yard, and for which she even sewed underwear. Sheltered, plain, shy, she preferred feathered creatures to people and identified with them; underneath she was all beak and claws. Her father was diagnosed with lupus when she was 12 and in many respects she remained stuck at that age, looking out at the world with a childlike detachment and not letting anyone in, except God. A Roman Catholic, she wrote about grotesques, she explained, to convey the shocking Christian vision of original sin. Not much sin coloured her life. Mr Gooch, an indefatigable and poker-faced researcher, tracks down the one man known to have kissed her: "I had the feeling of kissing a skeleton and in that sense it was a shocking experience." ■

Birds were her delight

State enterprise

Waterway triumphs

Bond of Union: Building the Erie Canal and the American Empire. By Gerard Koeppel. *Da Capo Press; 480 pages; $27.95 and £16.99*

The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal. By Julie Greene. *Penguin Press; 475 pages; $30*

AS SOME governments are about to rediscover, the actual construction work can be the easy part when embarking on large infrastructure projects. Winning the necessary political support is much harder, especially from legislators keen on alternative public works that more directly benefit their constituents. The competing interests of places that stand to lose or gain from projects are further obstacles to overcome. So are the difficulties contractors experience when they seek to recruit thousands of dependable employees willing to work long hours in arduous conditions.

Just how stressful it is to get these projects started, let alone completed, is spelt out in case studies of America's two proudest achievements in canal building. Gerard Koeppel, a journalist, shows a scholarly fascination for the precise details of the legislative progress of the Erie Canal, the waterway that, in 1825, joined the Great Lakes to the Hudson river and so to the Atlantic ocean at New York City. Julie Greene, a historian, takes a more journalistic approach as she tells the sometimes joyful but more often pitiful stories of the builders of the Panama Canal, which, in 1914, joined the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

The commercial success of both canals exceeded the most extravagant expectations of their backers. The Erie Canal enabled the United States to penetrate the Appalachian range before the French and British could lay permanent claim to the continental interior. The Panama Canal halved the shipping distance between New York and San Francisco and opened up Asian markets to the United States.

Politicking nonetheless bedevilled the Erie Canal from its conception in 1807 to its completion 18 years later. A slew of presidents from Virginia were cool to a project that boosted the commercial strength of New York. Thomas Jefferson wanted waterworks to increase shipping on the Potomac river and dismissed the proposed canal as "little short of madness".

The imperial mood of the times and the boisterous backing of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft provided all the political support the Panama Canal needed to secure federal funding. Diplomatic spats were solvable. The government of Panama was sometimes obstreperous but ultimately bent to American muscle. Manpower was the real problem, and in particular the difficulty of persuading engineers and skilled tradesmen to leave the United States to dig a ditch in a fetid tropical swamp.

Most of these mainly white Americans commanded far better pay and conditions than even skilled workers recruited in Central America and the Caribbean. The agency responsible for building the canal and administering the Canal Zone, the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC), had no alternative but to provide them with such American necessities as iceboxes and porcelain baths as well as such perks as home leave and houses with wide verandas. The privileged status of the Americans caused understandable resentment among workers from elsewhere but the efforts of trade unionists to organise these workers were frustrated by their diversity. The ICC had, of necessity, to recruit widely to hire the 57,000 people it needed and this, it noted, had one beneficial result: the many different races and nationalities minimised the chances of "the combination" of the workforce "which would be disastrous".

The chastened political left sought solace in the thought that the Panama and Erie canals were fine advertisements for state enterprise. Their very success demonstrated that public projects were not necessarily inefficient, extravagant and dishonest. Today's free-spending governments may take heart. ■